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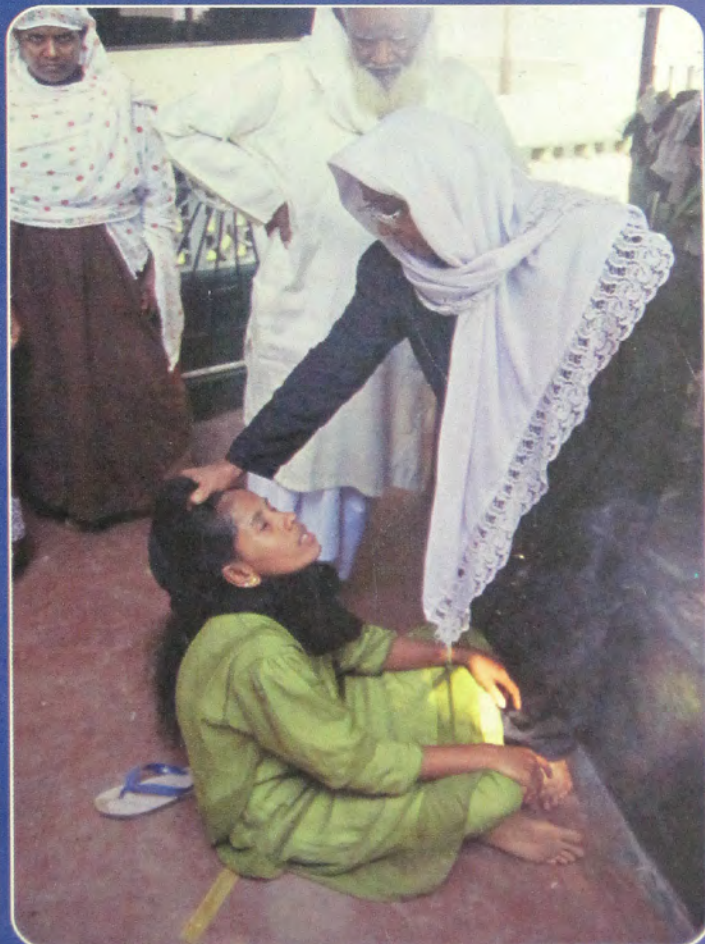
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Lived Islam in South Asia

ADAPTATION, ACCOMMODATION & CONFLICT


SOCIAL SCIENCE
PRESS



EDITED BY
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Helmut Reifeld**

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Real Patidar's mission is to organize the information on Satpanth religion, which is a Nizari Ismaili sect of Shia branch of Islam, and to make it universally accessible and useful. Real Patidar Books helps readers discover the material on Satpanth online while helping authors and researchers in their studies. You can know more by visiting <http://www.realpatidar.com>

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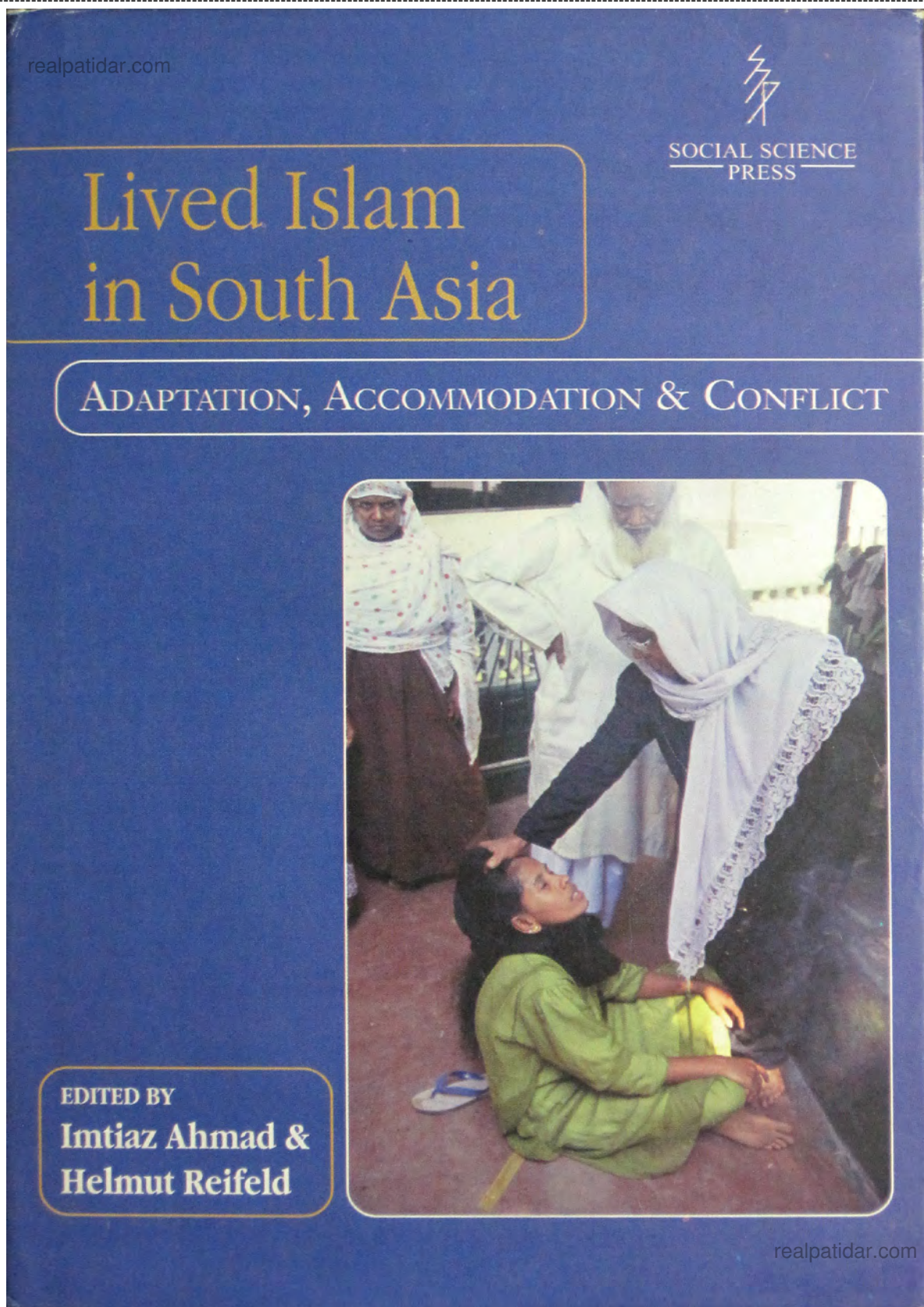
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11

Liminality and Legality: A Contemporary Debate among the Imamshahis of Gujarat

DOMINIQUE-SILA KHAN

The main shrine at Pirana, a village located near Ahmedabad in Gujarat, registered under the 1950 Bombay Public Trust Act as 'Imam Shah Bawa Rauza', is one of the many Muslim sacred spots of South Asia that attracts devotees of various creeds. Muslims and Hindus belonging to different castes and religious traditions freely mix within the precincts of the *dargah*, particularly during the annual *urs* festival which takes place on 25 Muharram. The shrine thus functions as an open, shared space transcending communal barriers, very much like the famous Ajmer *dargah* dedicated to the Sufi saint, Muinuddin Chishti. Needless to say, the history of the shrine and the identity of the saint who is buried there is of little concern to average pilgrims, as long as they are allowed to worship there. Inside the mausoleum, their common reverence for the *pir* and the belief in his blessing and healing powers enables them to downplay their own caste and religious affiliations.

The Satpanth: A Historical Perspective

The shrine is not only a centre of Sufi and popular piety; it is also the main seat of a particular sectarian tradition referred to as Imamshahi or Satpanth, the followers of which are said to number about 9 lakh

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Petition

(Khan and Moir 1999). For several years now, its former and present members have been engaged in a series of conflicts that have recently assumed a communal aspect and created an atmosphere that, according to some affiliated Sayyids, 'resembles that of Ayodhya' (petition to the Government of India, dated 20 September 1994). The interest of the Satpanthis or ex-Satpanthis in the shrine is of a totally different nature from that of people seeking non-sectarian devotion, a feature which is common in South Asia and some other countries. Non-sectarian devotion, which has a universal character should be clearly distinguished from the beliefs and practices of the Satpanthis.

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209 is incorrect.

The 'composite' nature of the Imamshahi tradition has been largely misunderstood by journalists and lawyers who see in its founder another Kabir: Imam Shah is portrayed as a tolerant Sufi saint of the fifteenth century who, 'fed up with Islamic rigidities', created a sect where elements drawn from various Hindu traditions were associated with Sufi Islamic beliefs and practices. In this way, he is supposed to have attracted both Muslim and Hindu followers without demanding a formal conversion from the latter.¹ The 'official' division of the Satpanthis into Hindus (who make up about 85 per cent of the sect, and of whom the Patidars constitute 75 per cent) and Muslims has been made along these lines.

Book
Nanji:1978

Although not fully explored to this day, the historical roots of the Satpanth are far from being shrouded in mystery, in spite of the fact that many modern Satpanthis continue to ignore or even deny their origins. The Satpanth is actually an offshoot of South Asian Nizari Ismailism—itself a branch of Shiite Islam—which was also, till recently, referred to as 'Satpanth' and whose members are now mainly known as 'Agakhani Khojas' (Ivanow 1936). A common assumption among the rare scholars who have devoted a few pages or a few lines to the study of this sect is that the Imamshahi Satpanth detached itself from the 'parent body' or mainstream Nizarism at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This was the time when Muhammad Shah, the founder's son, proclaimed that his father and/or himself was the 'real' religious leader of the sect instead of the Persian Imam (Nanji 1978). However, recent research points to the fact that the split may have

Newspaper

¹See for example, 'Distorting a Tradition', *Rashtriya Sahara*, May 1998, pp. 24–5, and 'The Pirana Shrine becomes a Bone of Contention', *Indian Express*, Ahmedabad, 19 April 1998.

Indian
Express

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occurred at a much later date, most probably during the late eighteenth or even the early nineteenth century.² Be that as it may, it can be demonstrated that until recently, there existed important links as well as sharp controversies between the followers of Imam Aga Khan and the Imamshahi Satpanthis. Some groups of Imamshahis continue to perform the same rituals (*gat-pat*) and share the same literature (*ginans*) as the 'mainstream' Agakhani Nizaris. In this way, the liminality that traditionally characterizes both the Imamshahi and the Nizari Khoja tradition has a common origin.

Liminal Identities

At this juncture, it is important to briefly analyse the causes and consequences of the phenomenon we have chosen to refer to as 'liminality'. But before doing so, we will have to briefly define the term and distinguish it from the concept of 'syncretism' which has been often indiscriminately used by colonial and post-colonial authors to describe all kinds of religious movements that appeared to them as 'hybrid' or 'ambiguous' (Oberoi 1994: 9). As reminded by many scholars, from a historical perspective, all religious movements are naturally syncretistic, and so are civilizations and cultures. On the other hand, in labelling a number of South Asian religious sects in which Hindu and Muslim elements coexist as 'syncretistic' the authors of the British census assumed the existence of 'pure' faiths and viewed these movements as 'hybrid', 'incomplete' or 'distorted' forms of religion (*ibid.*) that emerged, according to them, as the consequence of ignorance and superstition. Such a vision, it goes without saying, is closely connected with the notion of 'orthodoxy' and the assumption that each religion must possess a normative, 'correct' form in contradistinction to which all other beliefs are regarded as 'heterodox' or 'deviant'.

Although considerably enlarging the concept of 'syncretism' Tazim Kassam yet acknowledges its dynamic aspect in her analysis of an Ismaili text attributed to the famous fourteenth century Satpanthi Nizari missionary of Multan, Pir Shams Sabzwari, (1994: 231–2, 241). However, she still sees this devotional composition as a transitional

²I am grateful to Zawahir Moir who generously shared her latest findings with me regarding the history of the Imamshahi sect. We have together started an extensive research project on this tradition.



phenomenon and suggests that it enables two different cultures 'to make their transitions with relative ease and continuity' but that 'the existence of foreign elements demands resolution ...'. In this way, she concludes that the syncretism of some South Asian Nizari compositions 'is less an amalgam that results from a compromise reached between two different religious traditions than a conscious, clever and creative strategy to effect a smooth process of conversion' (ibid.). Similarly, although in a different context, M.I. Khan (1994: 2) essentially views the sacred literature of the Kashmiri Rishis not as an alternative form of Islam or an altogether different faith, but as a 'transition to Islam' as the title of his book indicates. For him, 'the syncretic tradition has been the necessary concomitant of the process of Islamization rather than its culmination'. Esmail (2002: 36–7) refuses to apply the term 'syncretism' to the sacred literature of South Asian Nizaris. Rejecting the idea of a conscious strategy of conversion, he asserts that, 'It is the product, rather, of an indigenous "organic" creativity ... the literature of a particular time and place, and displays the culture and conditions peculiar to that setting.'

As for the term 'liminality', first used in the domain of religion by Van Gennep and Turner as Mayaram reminds us (1997: 38), it is linked to the image of the threshold: 'Liminality is used as a shorthand for the intermediary, whether in the form of bridges, gates, doorways, bodies or social margins. These liminal or intermediary locations are points of intersection between the theological discourses' (ibid.). However, understanding that the ideas of liminality themselves may still imply a dualism, the same author rightly expresses her doubt about the relevance of this term: 'I am not sure that liminality avoids being premised upon a binary formulation ...' (ibid.); but she adds that this term is, nonetheless, preferable to that of syncretism in so far as it implies the existence of 'a line of thought that emphasizes "fuzzy" thinking as an alternative to bivalent, either/or logic' and may suggest 'a potentially anti-structural questioning of categorial identities, in this case, "Hindu" and "Muslim"' (ibid.: 37, 39).

In my forthcoming study on the formation of Hindu–Muslim religious identities in South Asia, I have used this concept of liminality in a similar sense, stressing that the image of the 'threshold' that it suggests 'need not ... be viewed only as a temporary space, a kind of limbo out of which one would eventually have to emerge to return to normality. It may be regarded as a permanent opening into a world of multiple values.' Each follower of a 'liminal' tradition should be



regarded as a kind of Janus *bifrons*, the faithful custodian of a doorway who, choosing to remain in this intermediary location, thus guarantees the existence of multiple values and the free exchange of ideas in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. However, as liminal religious identities are less and less accepted in the contemporary world where binary values dominate, the 'people of the threshold' have been forced to cross the doorway or have been walled-in, as the open space is closed and gradually replaced by a boundary wall (ibid.).

At this stage, however, I would add that syncretism and liminality should be used as conceptual tools only if one keeps in mind the fact that both these terms always reflect a particular viewpoint. This is necessarily the perspective of an outsider, whether an ordinary observer or a scholar, whose vision is influenced by the prevalent or taken-for-granted binary categories—even though he may not accept them as a universal truth; for this reason it often does not coincide with the view of the devotees themselves.

The other point I wish to make here is that, even from the same perspective, not all religious beliefs and practices that associate various Hindu and Islamic elements can be subsumed under the label 'liminal'. For instance, the 'non-sectarian' sharing of a sacred space, as described at the beginning of this article, should not be viewed—or referred to—as liminal or syncretistic. In this case, we are confronted with a plurality of identities that do not vanish through a common act of worship: they are rather 'subdued' or recede to the background while sharing a sacred space or time.

The Imamshahi Satpanthi configuration, however, can be termed 'liminal', provided one does not forget that such a categorization implies a particular perspective. A more detailed discussion of this complex issue, which is out of the scope of this paper, may be found in our forthcoming, *Crossing the Threshold*.

Let us now revert to the Imamshahis. Not all scholars agree on the reasons that encouraged the leaders and the followers of the Nizari sect to use Indic and Islamic elements in tandem in their sacred literature and rituals, so as to create what appeared to the British census officers as a 'confused set of beliefs', an 'incomplete' or 'hybrid' form of religion. However, by examining in detail the complex history and the different systems of philosophy developed by the Ismailis, one can surmise that three main factors influenced the origin of the Satpanth, the 'acculturated' Indic form of Nizarism that was referred to in Arabic as *sirat-e mustaqim*.

Book
Crossing
the
Threshold



✓ Firstly, it may be perceived as a carefully planned method of conversion. ✓ This should not, however, be interpreted as a kind of Machiavellian and subversive plot fomented to mislead and deceive devotees, as has been understood by some Arya Samaji ideologists at the beginning of the twentieth century (Nanji 1978, Daftary 1990, Shackle and Moir 2000, Asani 2002, Esmail 2002). ✓ During the 1920s, influenced by some of his Brahman friends and feeling suddenly ashamed of his traditions, a Satpanthi Patel known as Ram Narayan Limbani renounced his original faith to join the ranks of the Arya Samaj. Limbani was responsible for converting a good number of Patidars to this version of Hinduism. 'Contractor', as he later referred to himself, published a book where he expounded in detail on the idea of a secret conspiracy imagined by the Ismaili preachers to convert the Hindus.³ According to him, the Nizari mission actually aimed at deceiving the local population by making them believe that they had remained Hindus while adhering to the Islamic Satpanth. Interesting for us is the fact that Contractor referred derogatorily to the Imamshahi sect as a '*kichdia panth*', a rather amusing expression which those who have analysed the phenomena of syncretism and liminality in north India will undoubtedly appreciate.

In reality, a careful study of the old Fatimid *dawa* or mission work shows that this 'strategy' of conversion had different and also deeper implications (Ivanow 1939). The *dawa* should also be viewed in a more realistic historical context when various religious traditions were competing for pre-eminence, but it was also in conformity with the universality, flexibility and tolerance that characterizes Ismaili philosophy as a whole. This leads us to the following point: going further than the Sunni tradition in accepting the message of the prophets of the past and their law as a necessary stage in the history of mankind, the Ismailis have sought to integrate to a certain extent nearly all the important religious currents of their time. In the same way as Zoroaster and his movements were taken into account by the missionaries in Persia, the various Hindu creeds were paid due attention and made to fit into what Henry Corbin calls the Ismaili 'meta-history', leading to a genuinely 'universalizing' perception of religion (Corbin 1983: 37–47). Eventually, religious dissimulation, referred to as *taqiyya*, a major feature of Shiism, was also responsible for the fact that the

³Contractor, Ram Narayan Limbani, in his *Pirana Satpanth ni pol* (Ahmedabad, 1926), was actually one of the first authors to disclose to the outer world the secret doctrines and practices of the Imamshahis.



Satpanth, whether 'mainstream' or Imamshahi could appear, according to the context, as a Sunni Sufi movement or as a Hindu tradition similar to the numerous local sectarian movements or *panths* prevalent in medieval South Asia (Daftary 1990: 566 and Passim, Nanji 1978: 68, 75). Nearly through the whole of their history in the sub-continent, the Nizaris had to resort to *taqiyya* to protect themselves from the persecution of the Sunni rulers and of their *ulema* who sought to either convert or exterminate them. Those who chose to live in the guise of 'orthodox' Sufis openly interacted with the various local *tariqas*, at times even taking formal initiation into these orders, and remained so inconspicuous that to this day many people regard some famous Ismaili Pirs as 'Sufi shaikhs of Sunni persuasion' (Asani 1983: 50, n. 21). Others were not only allowed, but encouraged by the missionaries, to maintain their original caste identity and continue outwardly with some of their former religious customs. The latter were later on referred to as 'Gupti' or 'the secret ones'. The integration of Indic and Islamic elements into the tradition made it possible for the Satpanth to survive in a hostile environment and at the same to gain many converts who came to share common beliefs expressed in various forms and idioms.

Strategy of
Taqiyya

In this way, before historical, political and social circumstances came to challenge this configuration the Satpanthis, both 'mainstream' and Imamshahis, felt no need to define themselves clearly and openly as 'Hindus' or 'Muslims' and survived with various identities that they did not perceive as conflicting or contradictory.

This picture, that was first disturbed with the British census operations, changed drastically with the pressure of Islamic reformists and the activities of Hindu revivalist bodies between the later half of the nineteenth century and our days (Jones 1976 and 1981).

The arrival of the Imam Aga Khan in India, the creation of Hindu and Muslim personal law and the events linked with the Partition were other powerful factors that triggered those transformations. As liminality within Islam was less and less tolerated by Sunni and Twelver Shia organizations, gradual reforms were implemented within the Agakhani Khoja community that brought it closer to 'mainstream' Islam. Among the Imamshahi followers, the Sayyids who claimed to be the descendants of Imam Shah, along with some other converted communities, were gradually led to adopt a stricter Sunni or Twelver Shia identity. Conversely, starting with the Arya Samaj, Hindu revivalists sought to gradually 're-Hinduize' the Imamshahi Gupti communities. As long as Satpanthis who accepted this line severed



all links with their sect and adhered to the Arya Samaj, the Sanatan Dharm movement, or the Swami Narayan or Ramanandi orders, the Satpanth was not threatened by communal conflict, although its individual members appeared to outsiders as having totally separate religious identities; the secrecy which surrounded the *panth* prevented them from actually seeing what was at stake.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the process of shifting identities was intensifying itself, a prominent leader of the Imamshahi mainstream community, Sayyid Ahmad Ali Khaki who represented the Jalalshahi branch of Sayyids, sought to strengthen the liminality of his tradition; although he was certainly convinced of the truth of his vision, he probably did it mainly to keep his Patidar followers who were more and more attracted into the orbit of the Arya Samaj or the Sanatan Dharm movements, and also to avoid being absorbed into the Agakhani Khoja community as its living Imam sought to reclaim his scattered disciples. Although Khaki had himself adopted an outwardly Sunni identity, he started to publish a series of pamphlets and edited a number of Imamshahi sacred texts, among which was the ritual prayer—a variant of the Nizari Khoja *du'a* to which he gave a new 'Hinduized' title: *Yagya vidhi*. The text itself, which remained largely unchanged beginning with the traditional *Bism'illah* invocation, was provided with extensive footnotes explaining the 'Hindu' meaning of Muslim terms. He was so successful in stressing the Vedic equivalents of Islamic concepts that in 1931 the Hindu Mahasabha declared that the 'Satpanth' should be cleared of any suspicion as it was undoubtedly a 'Vedic' tradition.⁴

Till the eighties, it can be said that the major conflicts that had torn the Imamshahi tradition at its very onset revolved around the issue of spiritual authority, which led to the fragmentation of the Satpanth into various sub-sects. The Imamshahi 'mainstream' (whose Sayyids were themselves divided into three branches), the Athias, Sathias and Panchias gradually built their own separate shrines at Pirana and elsewhere. At the sectarian level, the main conflict was between those who had adopted a Sunni identity and those who appeared outwardly as Twelver Shias (Khan and Moir, 1999).

But the actual communal conflict started when, in the late eighties, one of the religious heads of the Imamshahis launched a movement that aimed at reforming the sect in order to integrate it fully into

⁴See 'Hindu Maha Sabha and Satpanthis', *The Times of India*, 15 August, 1931: 13.



'mainstream' Hinduism. Karsan Das Kaka, the *mujavar* of the Pirana *rauza* who was the leader of the 'converted' community, undertook a series of reforms by suppressing the Islamic elements that were present in the rituals and literature, leaving only those which were not 'spurious' from this particular point of view. A large group of Guptis, in particular Patidars from Kutch, followed him (Khan, forthcoming).



We have yet to understand how this process evolved and even, to a certain extent, was silently accepted by the Sayyid who was Karsan's spiritual master of *murshid*, and Khaki's son and successor. First of all, it must be stressed that earlier, outward religious identities within the Satpanth were far from being as clear as it may appear from what we have said above, even from the point of view of *taqiyya* or religious dissimulation. For instance, traditionally the Kakas or heads of the Guptis had two names, a Muslim and a Hindu. Before he renounced the use of this title, Karsan Das himself was also known as 'Pir Karim'. Hindu/Indic customs were prevalent among the Sayyids who posed as Sunni or Shia Muslims. The Kakas sometimes offered prayers (*namaz*) in the mosque that was built at the beginning of the eighteenth century within the precincts of the *dargah* (it may be understood that they did it for *taqiyya* purpose), while the allegedly Sunni Sayyids were far from being strict in the performance of the obligatory religious duties.

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1981
23



Tampering with the rituals and the sacred literature of the Imamshahis was possible only, needless to say, for those who had a deep knowledge of their original traditions and who, to a certain extent, respected it. Therefore, this task was entrusted to the senior leaders of the community who actually belonged to the Patidar caste. Interestingly enough, these efforts aimed at preserving the originality of the tradition while seeking to give it an 'orthodox Hindu' appearance. This was not too difficult owing to the abundance of Indic terms and concepts that already were an integral part of the tradition (Kassam 1994) and also because, different, and often widely divergent currents have always existed within the broad denomination of 'Hinduism'. What was not possible to change—as, for instance, the shape and the structure of the shrine—was reinterpreted or explained away. The liminal character of the tradition was thus fast disappearing, creating a rift between the members who assumed different outward identities but also among those who did not accept these 'reforms' and transformations.



This paper seeks to explore some complex issues connected with religious identity and liminality by examining a number of civil suits



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that were filed in Gujarat between 1931 and 1998 by the Satpanthis and the Sayyids who claim to be the descendants of Imam Shah. Contrary to a common assumption, in South Asia, the liminality that historically characterizes the Ismail Nizari movements is very different from the 'composite' or 'acculturated' forms assumed by some Sunni Sufi traditions. The main difference, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, lies in the fact that the religious identity of the Sunni Sufis affiliated to various orders (*tariqas*) has not generally been questioned, even if these mystics have used concepts and images drawn from various Indic traditions such as Krishnaite *bhakti* or the Nath movement. This type of sacred literature, we will argue, cannot be termed 'liminal'. The examples of some famous Muslim saints, such as Abdul Quddus Gangohi in the sixteenth century or the eighteenth century Punjabi mystic and poet Bullhe Shah could be given here to illustrate the former phenomenon. Similarly, the devotees of the Ajmer saint, Mouinuddin Chishti, who may be classified along diverse religious, sectarian or caste lines, do not feel the need to deny that the Pir they worship belongs to the Sunni-Sufi tradition. In contradistinction to this, the personality of the Nizari preachers, for instance, usually appeared to be elusive to the non-initiated, who would not be able to define them by using the broad categories 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. That is why the Nizari saints have been often claimed by various religious traditions. In this respect, one must add that their liminality exists only from the point of view of those who do not know the Satpanthi Nizari tradition or try to analyse it from a particular binary perspective. A specialist—or a traditional Nizari himself—could easily classify them as 'different Muslims', followers of a particular Shia tradition within Islam.

A Judicial Jigsaw

Private
Property

The first case that was filed in the twentieth century revolved around the administration of the shrine of Pirana and the rights of the various parties involved. Till 1931, the *dargah* and its land, which was a private property belonging to the alleged descendants of Imam Shah, was administrated by the head of the converted communities who acted as the *mujavar* (*khadim*) of a Sufi shrine and was traditionally referred to by his Persian title of Kaka. The 'ordinary' devotees who had no connection, whether past or present, with the Satpanth were not concerned by the dispute that took place during that period. In

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1939, as the final result of this long case (civil suit no 168, Ahmedabad Court) the creation of a Trust was decided on: the Imam Shah Bawa Rauza Sansthan Committee, which consisted of ten members, was to administer the shrine and its lands henceforth. Later, in the fifties, it was registered by the charity commissioner according to the Bombay Public Trust Act of 1950 under category E, which is defined as 'cosmopolitan'.

Administer

The 1931 case was filed by a group of Gupti Patidars against the Kaka, Ramji Laxman (also known as Hayat) who was later supported by some Sayyids. The *mujavar* of the shrine, who was also a Patidar, was accused of misusing the funds. The plaintiffs stressed the fact that Imam Shah was the founder of a sect called Satpanth and that they were their followers, referred to as Satpanthis. They demanded the creation of a public charitable trust. The Sayyids denied that the Patidars were Satpanthis and thus, could not have held any interest in the shrine's property: they were Hindus, whereas, Imam Shah, their ancestor, was a Muslim saint. He had himself appointed the first Kaka to administer the shrine and, therefore, they were the only persons entitled to continue this tradition and to certain rights, as the institution of the Rauza had been created for their benefit. The plaintiffs replied that the Satpanthis were indeed Hindus belonging to the Pirana 'Atharva Veda Dharma'⁵ which was founded by Imam Shah. Owing to this historical circumstance, they also had certain rights.

After having heard the different parties, the court ended up by defining three different categories interested in the Pirana Rauza: the 'Gadivala Kaka' (that is to say the *mujavar* who was traditionally a Patidar by caste), the 'Sayyids' (belonging to two branches who were the descendants of Imam Shah) and the 'Satpanthis'. The Trust Committee was constituted according to this classification. It included the Kaka, three Sayyids and seven Satpanthis. The committee had the right to exclude a Satpanthi in case he ceased to follow the Satpanth, a question that was to be determined by the members of the trust. But even after this, no clear definition of the Satpanth itself was suggested by the concerned parties.

The classification and the terminology used was to have far-reaching consequences in the future. For example, there was no mention of the Satpanthis being *murids* or Guptis although they were

⁵One of the many cover names by which the *ginans*, that is to say the Nizari (mainstream and Imamshahi) Sapanthi sacred texts, were referred to was 'Athar Ved' or 'Atharva Veda', the fifth Veda regarded as the final revelation of our times.



traditionally regarded as disciples and descendants of Imam Shah according to Suṭī terminology. This was by virtue of having been allowed by their Pir to continue practising some of their original customs as well as to conceal the Islamic elements of their faith for the purposes of *taqiyya*. Similarly, no remark was made on the function of the Kaka as a *mujavar* of the shrine, a term that clearly belongs to the traditional Sufi idiom. Also—and we should add characteristically enough—the Sayyids claimed that they were Muslims and the descendants of Imam Shah who was a Muslim saint, without specifying which kind of Islam he had preached. This shows clearly that at that time, the broad categories ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ had come to be regarded as monoliths and accounts for the fact that in the fifties, shortly after Independence, the Charity Commissioner could only register the shrine under the ‘Cosmopolitan’ category, as it was not possible to classify it as either ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’.⁶

In 1973, another civil suit was filed to demand some modifications in the administration scheme decided in 1939, and after the judgment of the court in 1975 a series of appeals were made from 1973 onward. The plaintiffs were Satpanthis and the defendants were Kaka Savji (who had succeeded to Ramji on the *gaddi* of Pirana) and some members of the Trust Committee. We will examine the appeal of 1976 in this paper.

The main interest of the appeal of 1976 lies in the fact that it is preceded by a lengthy, although somewhat confusing, description of the sect. It was argued by the Satpanthis that the fifteenth century saint Imam Shah wished to unite the Hindus and the Muslims: he believed in the four Vedas, particularly in the Atharva Veda, and had a special reverence for Nishkalanki Narayan who is the tenth incarnation of Vishnu. Muhammad Shah, Imam Shah’s son, is also known as Adi

Imp
Court
Case

⁶It may not be out of place to mention here the different conclusion made in 1938 by a local district magistrate regarding the religious identity of the shrine dedicated to Laldas, a Meo saint mainly revered by Meos and by other communities of Mewat. See Lakshman Tripathi, 1945, reprinted 1992, *Shri Laldasji* (Alwar: Shri Laldas Dharm Prachar Sangh), pp. 25–6. On the basis of an earlier police report, he states: ‘the above mentioned shrine belongs to the Laldasis whose faith is different from that of the Hindus and the Muslims ...’. One should also compare these cases with that of the Sikhs, but also with that of the Ahmadiyas who have officially been declared a non-Islamic sect by the Pakistan Government. Similarly, during the medieval period, Sunni theologians refused to classify the Ismailis among the Muslims. A more detailed discussion on this subject, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article, will be included in my next project on the Pranami tradition.



Vishnu and his mother as **Adi Shakti**.⁷ The majority of Imam Shah's disciples are Hindus, mainly Patidars, who follow the tenets of his creed. After their death most Satpanthis are cremated but a part of their bones are kept to be later interred in a grave, whereas the Kaka is directly buried. The plaintiffs also argued that the Sayyids, being the descendants of Imam Shah had propagated the Satpanthi faith earlier, but that they cannot now be considered as Satpanthis, because when they filed the suit in 1973 they were no longer preaching nor practising the Satpanth. Further, the plaintiffs said that the Sayyids, being 'predominantly' Muslims (other adjectives such as 'essentially' and 'basically' Muslims were also used during the case), could not claim any right. They were referred to as 'pure' Muslims who did not render any assistance to the Trust, nor did they do anything for the Satpanth. Consequently, the plaintiffs requested the court to make some changes in the scheme which provided *haqs* or fees for certain religious services performed by the Sayyids. They insisted that their affiliation to the Satpanth should be made a condition for receiving these dues; therefore, the adjective 'Satpanthi' had to be added in the administration scheme before the word 'Sayyids' and the joint committee had to decide to exclude those who would, according to this, cease to be Satpanthis.

Interestingly, although the suit was filed against the Kaka as well, he himself decided to support the plaintiffs by arguing that indeed the Sayyids are not Satpanthis.

The Sayyids replied that their ancestor Imam Shah was a Muslim by birth and had always lived as a Muslim, performing *namaz*, *roza*, etc.; he was never a Hindu saint. His descendants are, therefore, obviously Muslims and not Satpanthis. So why should they preach the Satpanth? The Sayyids argued that they were entitled to certain rights and privileges in the shrine as the Muslim descendants of Imam Shah whose sacred mausoleum it was, and not as Satpanthis. Actually, the Sayyids stressed their Muslim identity by listing the different dues according to the tasks usually performed by them—*fatia*, *bismillah*, etc.—rituals that, according to them, proved their Islamic identity beyond doubt. But this was questioned by the Satpanthi Patidars who claimed that earlier, the Sayyids performed '*puja* like the

⁷These elements would be perfectly familiar to any scholar who has studied South Asian Nizarism, as they are prominent motifs of the Ginanic literature: the Imam is equated with the tenth avatar of Vishnu, Fatima with the Goddess as Shakti, etc. See Nanji (1978) and the other publications on the Satpanth mentioned in the references.





Brahmins', conducting the ceremonies of *ghat-pat* which included the use of a vessel (*kalash, ghat*) and of consecrated water.⁸ Meanwhile, the plaintiffs claimed that contrary to what the Sayyids do now, they themselves never performed any Muslim rituals or participated in Islamic festivals like Muharram.

The conclusion of the court was revealing. It judged that the Sayyids indeed were not Satpanthis and never were Satpanthis. Nevertheless, they were entitled to certain rights as descendants of the saint buried at Pirana and as performers of a number of services at the *dargah*. As the Sayyids had been defined as a separate group since 1939 and not included in the Satpanthi category, the adjective Satpanthi should not, in any case, be added to the word Sayyid. As a result of this ruling, **no major change in the scheme was allowed** and the matter was entrusted to the district court of Ahmedabad for deciding whether some minor modifications were necessary.

As one can see, the confusion arises from the creation, in 1939, of arbitrary categories such as 'Sayyids' and 'Satpanthis', the former wishing to be defined as Muslims and the latter as Hindus. Secondly, the parties involved do not take into consideration historical facts such as the evolution of the tradition, nor the elements that explained the nature of this sectarian tradition. **These facts and elements could have been easily shown by producing a certain number of documents, mainly the sacred texts of the Imamshahi Satpanthis. In 1866, in the famous Aga Khan court case in Bombay, it was ultimately the *ginan* literature of the Khojas that was instrumental in establishing the specific identity of that community and its link with the Imam Aga Khan.**

✓
1866
famous
Aga Khan
Court
Case

In reality, both plaintiffs and defendants were concealing certain facts: the former by denying that their beliefs and practices were replete with Islamic elements not only pertaining to the particular Nizari Ismaili tradition but, at times, also to the Sunni or Twelver Shia ethos (as when some Kakas performed the namaz in the Pirana mosque or following the Muharram festival). In the same way, it was—and still is—the custom for some Sayyids to conduct the ceremony of *ghat-pat*, etc. **It is in fact the interpretation of these customs as 'Muslim' or 'Hindu' that is fraught with error—precisely because, the judges examining the case were unable to take into consideration or acknowl-**

⁸This is again a typically Satpanthi sacred ceremony which associates Sufi and Indic elements. A modified form of it is still practised by the Agakhani Khojas.



edge the religious phenomenon that we have defined as 'liminality'. This type of liminality would have been, actually, easily understood by examining the history of the Satpanth as a branch of Nizari Ismailism whose followers, initially endowed with 'liminal' personalities were, at that time, gradually shifting to sharply demarcated identities under the influence of various historical factors.

The Communalization of the Pirana Affair

The 1990s mark a turn in the evolution of the Satpanth and its main shrine of Pirana, which is reflected in the particular atmosphere that surrounded the court cases between 1992 and our days. To understand what prompted Kaka Karsan Das, the newly elected *mujavar* of the shrine to start a rapprochement with some Hindutva right wing organizations, one must mention briefly a number of crucial events that took place during the late seventies and the eighties. These events reflected a deep identity crisis within the Satpanthi community, and in particular among the Patidars who form about two-thirds of its followers. In Kutch, for instance, one of the traditional strongholds of the Imamshahis where entire populations of some villages were Satpanthis, an increasing number of Patidars who had been attracted into the orbit of Hindutva ideologists, abandoned their former affiliation and joined the rank of the Sanatani Hindus. They erected numerous temples to Lakshmi-Narayan that enshrined idols strictly prohibited in the Satpanthi tradition. Simultaneously, others who wished to remain faithful to the Satpanth challenged some of its customs and launched what has been referred to as 'the cremation movement'. It is in this light that we should perhaps interpret the attitude of the Kaka. By 'reforming' the rituals and the literature of his sect, he sought to preserve the specificity and the separate identity of the Satpanth while asserting its intrinsic Hindu nature (Khan, forthcoming). In this way, he was putting an end to the sharp critiques of the exponents of Hindutva and guaranteed the survival of the Satpanth at a time when the numbers of its followers were dwindling alarmingly. This exercise was a kind of acrobatics as it was not easy to achieve the subtle balance that was necessary to preserve the distinct character of the sect while making it appear unmistakably Hindu. On the other hand, the task was made easier by the earlier writings of Ahmad Ali Khaki, as by the original liminality of the tradition. However, some

2003

2/3 of Followers



* Very Important *
Satpanthis were joining Sanatan Hindu religion in Kutch



Translated books with Hindu look were prepared by Saiyeds



Establishing Dholka

Sayyids, supported by a few Patidars who had remained faithful to the former ideals, reacted sharply. The most prominent figures among the latter was Pachan Kaka, a former rival of Karsan Das who had been eliminated from the election for the *gaddi* of Pirana, and Ravji ... who posed as a sincere protector of a traditionally 'syncretistic' Satpanth. Interestingly enough, the Gupti leaders of the Athias, a detached branch of the Imamshahis which had established its separate *dargah* and *gaddi* at Pirana supported the opponents of Karsan Das.

5 Cases Filed

A series of civil suits were filed and complaints and petitions sent to the Government of Gujarat and India beginning 1992. In 1992 and 1993, at least five cases were filed by the Sayyids against Karsan Das and the reforming Patidars. In 1994, the Patidar writer, Ravji supported Sayyid Nuruddin who, with Mustafa Miya, was organizing a 'resistance movement' against the Kaka's reforms. In 1994, the Sayyids who had formed a committee referred to as 'Imamshah Sadat Committee' to defend their rights, lodged a criminal complaint with the State Home Minister of India. They alleged that the Kaka and his followers were trying to convert the *dargah* into a Hindu place of worship and therefore demanded protection. It is worth mentioning here a few of the points made in the petition. To begin with, the Sayyids argued that the *rauza* of Pirana was established for Hindu-Muslim alliance and brotherhood, and that Imam Shah had created a religion known as Satpanth whose followers were known as 'Satpanthis', while his descendants were popularly referred to as 'Sayyids'. It was pointed out that the *mujavar* of the shrine, traditionally known as 'Kaka' (which in Persian means 'servant', clearly indicating that he is subordinate to the Sayyids), had arbitrarily assumed the titles of 'Acharya' and 'Mahant'. Besides, although the *rauza* is originally a Muslim place of worship, it has been a shared space from the very beginning and Hindus and Muslims continue to visit it in equal numbers. Karsan Das was accused of having adhered to a right wing Hindutva organization and of trying to 'communalize' this sacred place. Therefore, the Sayyids demanded the protection of the Government of India, that would enable them to preserve the original tradition of the shrine, as well as their own rights and privileges.

1998-08-13
Imp court
Case

The case filed on 13 August 1998 by the Sayyids and supported by the Patidar rival of the present *mujavar*, Pachan Kaka, gives more details about the reforms brought about by the *gaddivala* Kaka and his followers. The plaintiffs tried to demonstrate that these reforms were illegal according to the original scheme framed in 1939. We will



examine two major points in this context. Firstly, the definition of the Satpanth that was proposed by the plaintiffs and secondly, the reforms that Karsan Das was accused of having initiated after his election as the *gaddivala* Kaka in 1986.

I will quote here the words used by the Sayyids (the plaintiffs) to describe the Pirana tradition: 'Pir Imam Shah established a religious denomination (order or school of thought) which became popular in the state of Gujarat as Satpanth (the correct path). Consequently, several religious right practices, observances and functions *predominantly Muslim* (italics mine) came to be established which have been customarily performed by Satpanthis for more than five centuries and which have become an integral part of their religion.' Describing the historical development of the shrine complex, the plaintiffs said that apart from the main tomb and subsidiary graves there was a building referred to as the *dholia* which was supposed to have been Imam Shah's housing quarter. The sacred complex also included a mosque and an Imambara (basically a Shia structure erected to enshrine the *taziyas* used for the Muharram festival). The Kaka was accused of having erected a huge shade over the *rauza* which prevented the passage of the *taziyas* during Muharram and of having cut the electricity and water supply of the mosque. Sayyids were no longer invited to recite the *fatiha* on different occasions as they did earlier.

The Kaka was said to have transformed the *dolia* into a Hindu temple by installing the images of various Hindu gods and goddesses, and had the Hindu symbol *Om* painted on a few walls inside the shrine complex; he was also charged with having tampered with the sacred literature of the sect, among others, by publishing a new version of their *dua* entitled, *Yagya vidhi* that was replacing the former book allegedly known as *Satpanth shastr ane moksh no dvar*. Finally, it was alleged that the head of the Pirana *gaddi* had renamed Muhammad Shah, Imam Shah's son and successor, as Adi Vishnu and the shrine as Prerna Pith instead of Pirana. The Sayyids, therefore, demanded that the earlier religious rites and ceremonies be restored through intervention of the court.

Karsan Das responded to these charges by filing an affidavit in December the same year. He reminded the court that the sacred complex of Pirana was registered at Ahmedabad under the Bombay Public Trust of 1950, under the number E-738. The letter 'E' referred clearly to its 'cosmopolitan' nature. He repeated that it was wrong to assert that the rituals, etc. were 'predominantly' Muslim as the



Pictures for decoration only

Books Banned by Trust

Karsan Das argued that the Trust was cosmopolitan and not Hindu or Muslim

Satpanthis were Hindus, following the Pirana Atharva Vedi Dharma. However, he insisted that they did not install real tri-dimensional images for worship, the pictures painted on the walls being mere decorations. He demanded that a clear definition of the Satpanth should eventually be included in the administration scheme initially framed in 1939. Further, he declared that the mosque, the Muslim graveyard near it and the *imambara* did not belong to the Trust and had never been registered as a part of the *rauza* complex; the Trust being cosmopolitan had nothing to do with a Sunni mosque and a Shia shrine.

He also mentioned the fact that within the precincts of the Pirana shrine there existed other structures that were managed by different trusts, such as the Nurshahi Momin Jamat Trust which administrated the tomb of one Nur Shah. Finally, to prove that the term *yagya* was not an innovation, he produced the older version published by Sayyid Ahmed Ali Khaki. That version—which had been banned together with the parallel publication of another Sayyid named Kassimali, mentioned by the plaintiffs, but had the advantage of bearing the same title—clearly revealed the ‘syncretistic’ nature of the *panth* that the accused Kaka was now trying to emphasize: Imam Shah was a great Sufi who had shown the equivalence of the famous utterance of Al Hallaj, the ninth century Mulsim mystic, with the Hindu *Om*—both pointing to the fundamental unity of the human soul with the Divine. To conclude, Karsan Das argued that since matters of faith were essentially subjective, they could not be discussed in court and that the use of adjectives such as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’ was baseless owing to the cosmopolitan nature of the Trust. Consequently, no illegal change had been introduced into the shrine complex nor in its rituals and ceremonies.

One of the remarks made by the charity commissioner with reference to this case was that the shrine, still known as ‘Bawa Imam Shah Rauza’, should be registered under the Muslim Waqf Board.

The Law and the Lords

We will now look at the arguments produced in court by the rival parties with historical documents and the recent field inquiries, which include our visits to the shrine and the analysis of the existing Satpanthi literature, new and old.

As has been stated earlier, the confusion that arises from the above mentioned court cases results from the failure to acknowledge the



complex historical reality of the Satpanth and to examine in detail the various versions of its sacred literature. On the other hand, this failure itself results from the legal definition of religious identities within the secular State of India—a definition that is the product of a long process initially started by the colonial power more than one hundred years ago.

While it can be proved that initially, the Imamshahi Satpanth was an offshoot of Nizari Ismailis, itself an undoubtedly Muslim tradition, it is not difficult to show that this branch of Islam took a distinctive character in the subcontinent, that gave it—from a particular perspective—a ‘syncretistic’ (in this case, we would rather say ‘liminal’) appearance, but also made it distinctive as ‘heterodox’ to other dominant Muslim groups. One should also mention the fact that, for *taqiyya* purpose, a mosque and then an *imambara* were later erected near the *rauza*. On the other hand, the activities of some Sufi orders (such as the *Suhrawardi tariqa*), later completed by the mission conducted by the Tabliqi Jamat, convinced many Sayyids to come closer to Sunni Islam, while Shia organizations, including more recently the Jaffri Federation, sought to convert the Satpanthis to the Ithna Ashari religion. This resulted in a complex setting that can be summed up as follows: some descendants of Imam Shah assumed a full-fledged Sunni or Twelver Shia identity, that is to say they ceased to practice the Satpanthi rituals, although they did not discontinue to visit the *dargah* which was still regarded as a sacred place and to claim certain rights. Others adopted a Sunni or Ithna Ashari identity only partially or outwardly while continuing earlier practices. This latter attitude is, in fact, the continuation of the customary Shia Ismaili *taqiyya*—the religious dissimulation that has been practised by these types of sects for centuries. As for the allegedly Hindu Satpanthis, they are related to the so-called Gupti phenomenon which is a typical feature of the history of Nizarism in South Asia. Therefore, in one sense, one can say that the allegations of both the plaintiffs and the defendants are at once both right and wrong. For instance, while retaining his Ismaili affiliation the Imam was, from the very beginning, considered to be a manifestation of Vishnu and often referred to in the Ginanic literature—whether of the Khojas or of the Imamshahis—as Narayan and Nishkalanki *avatar*. Even the Om symbol was given a dual meaning and was printed on the cover of the Satpanthi books in a form that made it simultaneously appear as the Hindu sacred syllable and as the name Ali when read from right to left. The *murtis* ‘installed’ in the

Imamshahi
Satpanth is
Muslim
religion

Taqiyya
is
practiced
for
centuries

Imam =
Nishkalank
Narayan

OM =
ALI



dolia were only wall paintings and not three-dimensional statues, so the accusation of image worship could not hold good.

If on one hand some Sayyids had totally detached themselves from the Satpanth, insisting only on preserving their hereditary rights, others, supported by rival Patidars, started a reactionary movement that was not only reflected in the court cases but also in their activities. While Karsan Das was revising the sacred Satpanthi literature by removing its Islamic elements—an exercise that had its interesting counterpart in the efforts made by the Agakhani Khojas to ‘re-Islamize’ the *ginans* by removing the Hindu elements—his opponents who had remained faithful to the Satpanth started to publish counter-literature. It did not only mean reverting to the old versions of some texts that had been banned by the *gaddivala* Kaka, but also introducing additional elements that could strengthen their viewpoint. However, the judicial tangle had its roots in the colonial power that ultimately opted for clear-cut categories that were later introduced into the Constitution and personal law in Independent India.

In order to understand the complexity of the issue at this juncture, it is necessary to refer to the Aga Khan court cases of the late 1860s that resulted in a definition of the Nizari Khoja community. Masselos (1984) had written on this subject with great clarity, but more recently Shodhan (1999) has given a new dimension to the problem by analysing its relationship with the colonial judiciary system and the consequences it was to have for religious identities in general. A few passages of her article merit full citation. First of all she recalls that initially, different systems were followed by the courts of different regions administered by the Crown. So in the Bombay Presidency, customary law was followed. For example, Justice Conch in 1867 ruled that, ‘the law by which the Khojas are governed is not properly speaking Hindu law, but that law modified by their own familiar customs.’ This situation continued till the passing of the Shariat Act in 1937. According to it, a codified Muslim law should be made applicable to all Muslims equally: ‘This application of a uniform Anglo-Mohammadan Shariat or text-based law was another process in the Indian judicial system which discredited a dispersed and decentralized dispute resolution by local polities’

The author shows that when the Bengal model—which favoured the division into uniform blocs, was later adopted, the court gave an authoritative view on what the Khoja religion was on the basis of colonial texts on Islam. Besides, ‘the case was entered under the chari-



table jurisdiction of the court. Thus the properties were seen as trusts endowed with a charitable purpose. The law held that such charitable properties were to be used by those who adhered to the original religion for which the trust was endowed. Therefore, at a time when the origin and nature of the Nizari Khoja religion was totally unknown in the subcontinent, the court had to discover what were the distinctive beliefs of these people.

Very
IMP

The case can be profitably compared to that of the Imamshahis. The 1866 civil suits of the Khojas led to a situation that was very similar and full of paradoxes that, more than once, provoked the laughter of the judges and others who were present in court. For instance, a Khoja witness declared that his religion was Shia, then said that he was Sunni. Similarly, another Nizari, speaking of the sacred texts of his sect, declared that it was neither a Shia nor a Sunni book but simply a good book. As Shodhan reminds us, the decision of the court made many people castigate the Khojas as 'incomplete Muslims', 'partially Hindus' and 'syncretists'. In her conclusion, the author stresses that determining only the acceptable practices amounted to 'freezing' the communities: the individual is supposed to hold a faith that is fixed and unchanging, which 'removes the possibility of recognizing the historicity of actual practices and dissent from within'. These lengthy quotations were necessary for the understanding of the issue raised in this paper, as Shodhan's deep analysis throws considerable light on the subject. The rest is well known: the artificial creation of two uniform blocs referred to as 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' and the sharp division established between them in the Article 25(2) of the Indian Constitution, that must serve as a model in all matters pertaining to personal law.

The Future of Liminal Religious Movements

One would like to ask if there was any chance for communities or sects to retain their liminal character in the present context, where the division into monolithic religious blocs is supported by the legal system?

A remarkable case should be mentioned here—the example of a section of the Imamshahi 'Hindu' *murids*. Having recently declared their allegiance to the Aga Khan, these Imamshahi Hindu *murids* have joined the Ismaili Nizari mainstream (which has itself reformed considerably to come closer to the Sunni mainstream) but continue



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Taqiyya

with their earlier Gupti customs. They have been permitted by the Imam to worship in separate *jamats* and when asked about their identity, generally reply: 'We are both Hindus and Muslims—Hindus by custom and Muslims by religion.'⁹

The example of the Imamshahis and of some other groups that originated from the Nizari Ismaili religion points to the fact that the liminal character of a movement does not necessarily mean an unknown or 'mixed' origin. A tradition may be originally Muslim and its adherents continue to be seen as liminal irrespective of whether they deny their origin or not.

Good
Taqiyya
Point

As far as the other Imamshahis are concerned, we can mention the partial success obtained by some of their sub-branches, such as the Athias and the Panchias; to avoid the criticisms and attacks from the Hindutva right wing, they have extensively resorted to the old custom of *taqiyya*. For example, the Athias have published a few booklets in the pure 'Hindu style' meant for a broader readership and built, outside the precinct of their shrine, an allegedly Hindu temple where worship is performed, so to say, 'in case of emergency'. At the same time, they keep their original liminal literature and rituals secret which they are careful not to disseminate outside the close circle of the initiated.

While the opposing Sayyids and Patels are publishing older versions of the *ginans* and a whole 'counter-literature' as a response to the revised publications directed by the *gaddivala* Kaka of Pirana, a prominent Jalalshahi Sayyid who himself practises *taqiyya*, has 'gone underground', secretly continuing to act as his *murshid* as well as the Pir of a few Guptis who refuse to follow the re-Hinduized version of the Satpanth. He also conducts for them the 'original' *ghat-pat* ceremony where the earlier version of the *dua* is recited.

Interestingly enough, the publications of the Kaka's opponents have started, for the first time, to openly refer to the historical origin of the Imamshahi Satpanth as a detached branch of the Nizari Ismailis. These Nizari Ismailis have been said to have separated owing to the fact that, from a certain period onward, they started to recognize a line of Imams that is different from the one accepted by the mainstream Agakhani Khojas. The evidence produced by them is, among others,

⁹For this valuable information, I thank Shafique Virani who has studied in depth the case of a *Gupti community of Bhavnagar* and generously shared with me the preliminary results of his research.

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an article written in 1936 by one of the most eminent scholars of Ismailism, Valdimir Ivanow.

In this way, the long denied historical connection of the Imamshahis with the Nizari Satpanth is being once more openly acknowledged. It remains to be seen if, by referring to this distinct form of Islam which has a long history and a rich philosophical and literary heritage and at the same time also asserting their independence from the Agakhani mainstream, these groups of Imamshahis will be able to survive as the representatives of a religious movement that is characterized—according to the current binary vision—by a strong liminality.

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Khoja
Court
Case

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12

Ritual Communication: The Case of the Sidi in Gujarat

HELENE BASU

Introduction

The western state of Gujarat in India is famous as the land of traders, industrialists and global emigrants, but it is also home to Adivasis, Indian migrant labourers and African immigrants. Gujarat is a place where different religious communities have settled side by side for centuries. High and low Hindu castes interacted on various levels of power and dominance with high and low Muslim *jamat* (kinship associations), Jain communities, Parsis and Christians. Rarely did these communities co-exist in a state of hermetical enclosure. Rather, religious pluralism manifested itself through the historical proliferation of context-bound practices that fostered communication across socio-religious boundaries.

Over the last two decades, Gujarat has not only developed into one of the most advanced industrialized Indian states, but also into a society in which Hindu nationalist ideology found its most ardent proponents (Nandy et al. 1995). Hindu nationalist discourse aims to erase plural traditions within Hinduism by inventing a unified image of a bounded Hindu universe (Bhat 2001). A similar trend towards the unification of doctrines and practices is also discernible in the context of Islamic reform movements (van der Veer 1994). Hindu nationalist and Islamic reform discourses mirror each other in their

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respective constructions of the 'Other', both depend on similar bureaucratic taxonomies of collective identities in terms of reified religious essences. Proponents of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism are especially adverse to popular understandings of religion that recognize the coexistence of plural transcendent powers. Seen from this perspective, the significance of religion is not primarily tied to the declaration of a politicized identity. Rather, religiosity is manifested in a variety of symbolic systems. These may intersect at some points and differ at others but share the concern for creating moral meanings.

In this paper I explore the latter dimension of religiosity in a local context. My focus is directed at the practical side of religion, at the actions, interactions and forms of behaviour within a symbolic space shared by people of multiple religious backgrounds. More specifically, I look at alternative constructions of boundaries that follow a different logic from bureaucratic and nationalistic taxonomies. Within the context of popular Muslim religiosity expressed in Sufi saint veneration, the making and breaking of boundaries structure religious experiences. The emphasis upon permeability and situational constructedness of symbolic boundaries creates what Geertz in his definition of religion referred to as 'aura of facticity' (Geertz 1973). A sense of reality is produced by and for practitioners across religious boundaries through ritual actions. Here, the concept of rituals is used analytically in the sense of a language or medium of social communication (Douglas 1973; Tambiah 1985). Although the sphere of ritual communication is distinct from non-ritual or everyday domains, both are closely interrelated. The term 'ritualization' coined by Bell provides a useful instrument for taking into account the nature of the relationship between both spheres (Bell 1992). According to Bell, ritualization refers to culturally specific strategies of actions resulting in the proliferation of privileged distinctions between acts (*ibid*).

Communication through ritual and strategic ritualization lead to the making as well as the breaking of boundaries in terms of the liminal. The notion of liminality stresses movement, transformation, and in-betweenness. It is closely embedded in theories of ritual and did in fact originate in van Gennep's model of rites of passage (1908). In the sixties, Victor Turner extended the concept further to denote ritual situations that are opposed to the socially structured state. These situations that result in unstructured states were called anti-structure (1969). Liminality is a phase in a social process that oscillates between structured and unstructured states. The liminal phase is characterized

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by ambiguity which allows for transformation and also reflexivity. The liminal state may be marked by inversion (e.g. high–low, pure–impure) or by the transgression of boundaries (e.g. the breaking of taboos). It is transformative (creating fertility, abundance, blessings), fuses incommensurables (e.g. man–woman, god–human, living–dead), and produces ambivalent powers. Such powers are especially attributed to persons who permanently exist in a liminal state referred to as ‘threshold people’. Liminal personae form the margins or interstices of social structures and in the neither here nor there of categorical systems. Examples are, itinerant faqirs, court jesters or ritual clowns. Building upon Turner’s approach, Don Handelman (1981) theorized the figure of the clown in ritual as a ‘symbolic type’ (Handelman 1981; 1998). Being inherently defined by ambivalence and ambiguity, the ritual clown as a symbolic type embodies the boundary of ritual and thus stands for the state of liminality itself. Liminal personae such as the symbolic type of the ritual clown redefined by sharing transformative qualities: ‘... [they] effect a movement of ritual qualities between spaces, subjects, and communities. In doing so, they bring the tangible boons of fertility, life, *baraka*, power, into a community and remove dirt, pollution, decay away from it’ (Werbner 2001: 139).

In order to address the question of ritual communication in the context of Sufi religiosity, I shall first outline the ethnographic context in which the specific cult I am dealing with here is situated. In the remaining parts of the paper, I shall present three distinct but related contexts of ritual constructions of boundaries and experiences of liminality. In the first context, a ritual identity of the Sidi faqir community is routinely established through liminal experiences in rituals. In the second context, these faqirs administer liminal experiences of other shrine supplicants. In the third context, faqirs enact a ritual Sufi hierarchy by performatively evoking the boundary of ritual, its frame and very end.

The Sufi Context

In public discourses, the category ‘Muslim’ is often represented as an undifferentiated, homogenous whole, seen as identical with the ideal—the *umma* as a clearly demarcated religious identity (cf. Hasan 1996:186). The social reality of Muslims, however, is shaped by considerations of status distinctions between kinship associations

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(*jamat*), inequalities of wealth and ritual hierarchies. The latter are particularly enacted in the field of Sufism. Sufi shrines are sites of institutionalized charisma conceptualized as *baraka* (spiritual power) and *karamat* (miraculous power). In Gujarat, networks of Sufi shrines are linked by high status and low status charismatic ritual agents who move in a religious field in which Muslims creatively deal with the tension between a sacred hierarchy and the proclaimed egalitarianism of Islam. The Sufi field is dominated by high status saints (Pir) who derive their privileged position from notions of descent and routinized charisma. Most of the well-known Sufi shrines in Gujarat are associated with a prestigious spiritual pedigree (*silsila*) of the Chishtia, Qadiria, or Rifai orders. Their shrines are controlled by lineage segments of Sayyid whose high status is based on the claim of being related to the family of the Prophet Mohammad. Living descendants of the *silsila* (spiritual pedigree) of historical Sufi saints are perceived to represent the knowledge, wisdom and specific interpretation of Islam of the original founder. The lower end of the Sufi hierarchy, by contrast, is marked by a range of liminal or threshold people—i.e. faqirs of various orders (e.g. Shah Madari, Musa Suhagi, Malang) of non-Sayyid birth. For faqirs, considerations of descent often give way to notions of individual calling and aptitudes that motivate a person to choose a specific religious path by joining a faqir order.

The faqir organization I am concerned with here has been developed by so-called Sidi people. The name 'Sidi' refers to people whose ancestors have immigrated from East Africa as slaves, seamen or traders (Basu 2000). Over time, a Sidi kinship network emerged in Gujarat which is collectively referred to as *jamat*. The social network of the *jamat* includes both ordinary Sidis and professional faqirs. Situated at the margins of the world of Sunni Muslims, Sidi faqirs administer tasks that contribute to the social regeneration of a regional social milieu at the lower end of the Muslim society. The Sidi and most of their clients belong to the class of have-nots—no money, no high status descent, and no political power.

The Sidi *jamat* numbers approximately ten thousand members most of whom live in oppressive poverty. Still, the specific Sidi cult of Sufi saint veneration enjoys great regional popularity especially amongst the poorer sections of the population. In the Sidi world, religion is understood as an important part of social life—complementing the mundane world. In this sense, religion refers primarily to actions and interactions within established social relationships.

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